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ABSTRACT

The partnership between Memphis State University (Tennessee) and seven Memphis City Schools using school-based decision making (SBDM) has evolved into a unique cooperative relationship. The goal of the pilot SBDM initiative has been to restructure the schools involved. University researchers undertook to observe and document the change process by attending planning, training, and decision making sessions at the seven sites and at district level over the first 3 years of SBDM implementation. This paper describes the partnership enjoyed by university researchers and the participants in the SBDM initiative of the Memphis City Schools and uses the partnership as a point of reference for a discussion of some of the concerns and issues associated with school and university collaboration. The discussion includes a description of the data collection and analysis and the objectives and manner of sharing research results with school personnel. Additional topics discussed include the need for commitment from both partners and the benefits to both partners. Appendices provide the School Council Group Process and Decision Making Inventory, bar graphs, and school climate data summaries. (IAH)

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A School and University Collaborative Project
Between Memphis City Schools and Memphis State University

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Paper presented in the symposium, Data-Based K-12
Learning Environment Reform

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Annual meeting of The American Association of Colleges for
Teacher Education, San Antonio, TX, February 25-28, 1992

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A School and University Collaborative Project Between Memphis City Schools and Memphis State University

Thomas C. Valesky and Carol Plata Etheridge
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> To imagine that teachers and scholars can come together to engage in serious discussions and conduct jointly designed research projects is not foolish in the 1990s. It does occur internationally in scattered networks of teachers and academics and emerging formal partnerships between schools and campuses. (Cuban, 1992, p. 9)

The partnership of Memphis State University and seven Memphis City schools using school based decision making (SBDM) has evolved into a unique cooperative relationship. It began traditionally enough with the school district's announcement that SBDM would be implemented in seven district schools. (For more information on SBDM implementation in these seven schools see Etheridge, Terrell & Watson, 1990). University personnel viewed this pilot initiative to restructure school management as a research opportunity. A proposal was made to the superintendent that university researchers observe the change process by attending planning, training, and decision making sessions at the seven sites and at the district-level over the first three years of SBDM implementation. From the university's perspective, the relationship would be very traditional: the schools implement and the university researches. However, as this relationship developed, the schools became more than just a place to collect data for the university. This paper describes the partnership enjoyed by Memphis State University, College of Education researchers and the participants in the SBDM initiative of the Memphis City Schools.

The MSU research team is interdisciplinary and composed of two faculty from a department of curriculum and instruction, one from educational

psychology, and one from educational administration. The team established a research agenda to assist the schools in their decision making as the implementation of SBDM proceeded. The data that are collected are categorized into five areas: (a) the process of implementing SBDM in the seven schools, (b) the means by which decision making processes occur in each school, (c) the changes in school culture, (d) the changes in student achievement, and (e) other indicators of school improvement (suspension rates; attendance rates; dropout rates; pregnancy rates; teacher turnover and attendance; school vandalism; and parent involvement). Baseline data were collected during the 1989-90 planning year (Valesky, Smith & Horgan, 1990). Data on items (a), (b), and (c) were collected and reported back to the school for the baseline year and the first year after school improvement plans were implemented, 1990-91. Items (d) and (e) above are routinely collected by the district and will be analyzed after the second year of implementing school improvement plans (1991-92) to give the plans time to have effect.

Data collection and analysis are two pronged. The first prong examines process. University researchers conduct structured and participant observations at local school council meetings to record issues and decision making processes. These observations document and describe the evolution of the types of issues raised, source of issues, nature of discussions, and nature of decision-making procedures. (See Appendix A for the "School Council Group Process and Decision Making Inventory" used for structured observations). SBDM participants keep minutes from all local school council meetings and transcribe them in a uniform format. Participants also keep logs of training activities for teachers, principals, and council members. University researchers are participant observers at training activities, faculty meetings, and parent meetings. Participants from all constituent groups are interviewed during structured site visits and at other times as appropriate and necessary. Participants or researchers initiate interviews. These data provide a comprehensive understanding of

processes and perspectives and enable understanding of how and why program implementation has evolved. Descriptive process data are reported annually to district officials and school sites. District officials receive annual progress reports summarizing SBDM processes across school sites (Etheridge, Hall, Brown & Lucas, 1990; Etheridge, Hall, Valesky, & Polizzi, 1992). Individual schools are not identified in these reports. Each local school site receives a progress report regarding their site. Unless sites decide to do so, these reports are not distributed elsewhere.

The second prong of data analysis examines outcomes. Three survey instruments measure school learning environments. Administered to the teachers, administrators, and students, these questionnaires measure perceptions of school climate, classroom climate, and student self-concept as a learner (Butler, Alberg, McNelis, Pike & Chandler, 1991). These data are analyzed by university researchers and reported back to the individual school sites (Valesky, Smith, & Horgan, 1990; Smith, Valesky, & Horgan, 1991). Each school site receives its own data with data from other sites reported anonymously for comparison (See Appendix B for sample data). District officials have not yet received the questionnaire results.

Reports are not simply sent; instead, meetings are held with teachers, administrators, and parents from the local schools. Other meetings are held with district-level implementers. At these meetings the researchers present and explain data placing the data in context, explaining alternative ways to use it, and making recommendations. However, participants at the school sites make decisions regarding how to use the data.

Thus far, reported data have been formative, which allows the schools to examine their data without threat of censure. This provides an atmosphere that elicits honest responses, for the school participants have no need to gloss over implementation problems. The site participants set their own priorities and use the data as necessary to bring about changes or foster support as needed. The

intention is to bring school personnel to a point where they no longer view evaluation data as threatening or casting pronouncements of failure. Rather, the intention is threefold: (1) to reinforce the view that evaluation data is necessary in the constant effort to improve the school, (2) to educate practitioners about data collection and data use, and (3) to get professionals and lay people alike to realize that success or failure cannot be determined after a short period of time.

Commitments

For this partnership to work effectively, there must be a great deal of commitment from both partners. The university must insure that the data provided to the schools will be helpful to decision making. Thus, the results must be provided in a timely and effective manner for critical decision making. Some adjustments to the timing in the administration of the questionnaires have already been made, from mid-spring to late-winter, in response to the practitioners' request to use the results in their spring planning sessions. Although it required changes in research agendas and time schedules for the university researchers, it was given top priority. University researchers also must be committed to spending the necessary time to inform and debrief school participants and overcome the habit of getting "quick data" without other obligations.

Commitments from the school councils, faculty, and administration also are required for this partnership to work. These commitments include the accurate and careful administration of the questionnaires, without which the data would be meaningless. Further, the school participants must be committed to keeping university researchers informed of meetings and willing to share views and experiences with researchers. Otherwise, process data would be difficult to obtain. Finally, the school participants must be committed to using the data formatively and overcome the need to focus only on positive results for "show and tell".

Benefits

There are benefits to both partners in this collaborative effort. The school professionals receive a rich data set that can be used for decisions leading to programmatic changes that improve the learning environments. University researchers have opportunities to facilitate immediate and long term positive changes in the schools even as they compile a database that can be used far beyond the immediate needs of the local school district or school site. This diverse database will provide the basis for training materials, curriculums, and theoretical discussions. The collection and analysis of both process and outcome data will provide maximum direction to others wishing to implement school based decision making.

Beneficial role changes have evolved among school employees and university researchers. The data collection is comprehensive and visible. University researchers are a regular presence in the seven school sites as observers and researchers engage in frequent interviews with school participants regarding processes of the initiative, changes occurring, rationales for change, and progress of changes. This constant researcher presence coupled with questioning and reporting has changed traditional researcher roles. They are not only data collectors or "watchdogs" in the traditional sense, but they have become debriefers and facilitators for the school practitioners. Practitioner roles have also changed. As school participants answer researcher questions, describe their rationales for what they are doing, and collect or examine data from their sites, they begin to analyze their programs and make decisions about viability of programs and areas needing further changes. In addition, they realize the need for documenting, and they begin to collect data independently of the researchers. Thus, their program implementer roles have expanded to include evaluator roles. This role change has resulted in a new sense of independence and comfort with school based initiatives and evaluation. These role changes demonstrate the desirability of collaborative research and evaluation between universities and

school districts. In addition, this kind of collaboration is appropriate and natural because: (1) School systems do not have resources for documentation/evaluation. Their monies are usually earmarked for program implementation and their personnel are not usually trained to evaluate programs or conduct research. (2) Universities do not implement school programs. Yet, since universities are charged with expanding knowledge, professors are expected to conduct research. Therefore, schools should look to universities to provide human resources for examining school reform initiatives. However, if a college professor were the only resource required, most school systems could have third party evaluations of their programs. Unfortunately, other resources are also needed to complete a thorough study. Resources such as computer time and research assistants are not readily available to school systems or universities. If the value and outcomes associated with reform efforts are to be understood, funding for school programs must be coupled with funding for research, documentation, and evaluation. If school districts cannot provide this funding, the university/school district collaborative should be used as a vehicle to obtain outside funding.

Collaboration is desirable for another obvious reason. It is not advisable for reform designers or implementers to do summative evaluation of their own reform efforts because of conflict of interest. Yet implementers should be involved with formative evaluation that enables revision and refinement of reforms so they are more likely to be successful. This should be the focus of collaborations. The collaborative discussed in this paper is an example of the type recommended by the Holmes Group in its discussion of Professional Development Schools:

> As school and university faculty work together in schools, strategies of inquiry will begin to match the complexity and variety of good teaching and learning. Research will become more responsive to the school. In the past, researchers have used schools merely as settings for experiments. In contrast, in a Professional Development School, research will arise

> from issues important to the school, be conducted collegially, and will enliven children's and teachers' work. (Holmes Group, 1990, p. 61)

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APPENDIX A

SCHOOL COUNCIL GROUP PROCESS AND DECISION MAKING INVENTORY

School_____ Observer_____ Date_____

Number of people present in each category:

____parent
____administrator
____teacher
____student
____community member
____other (explain)

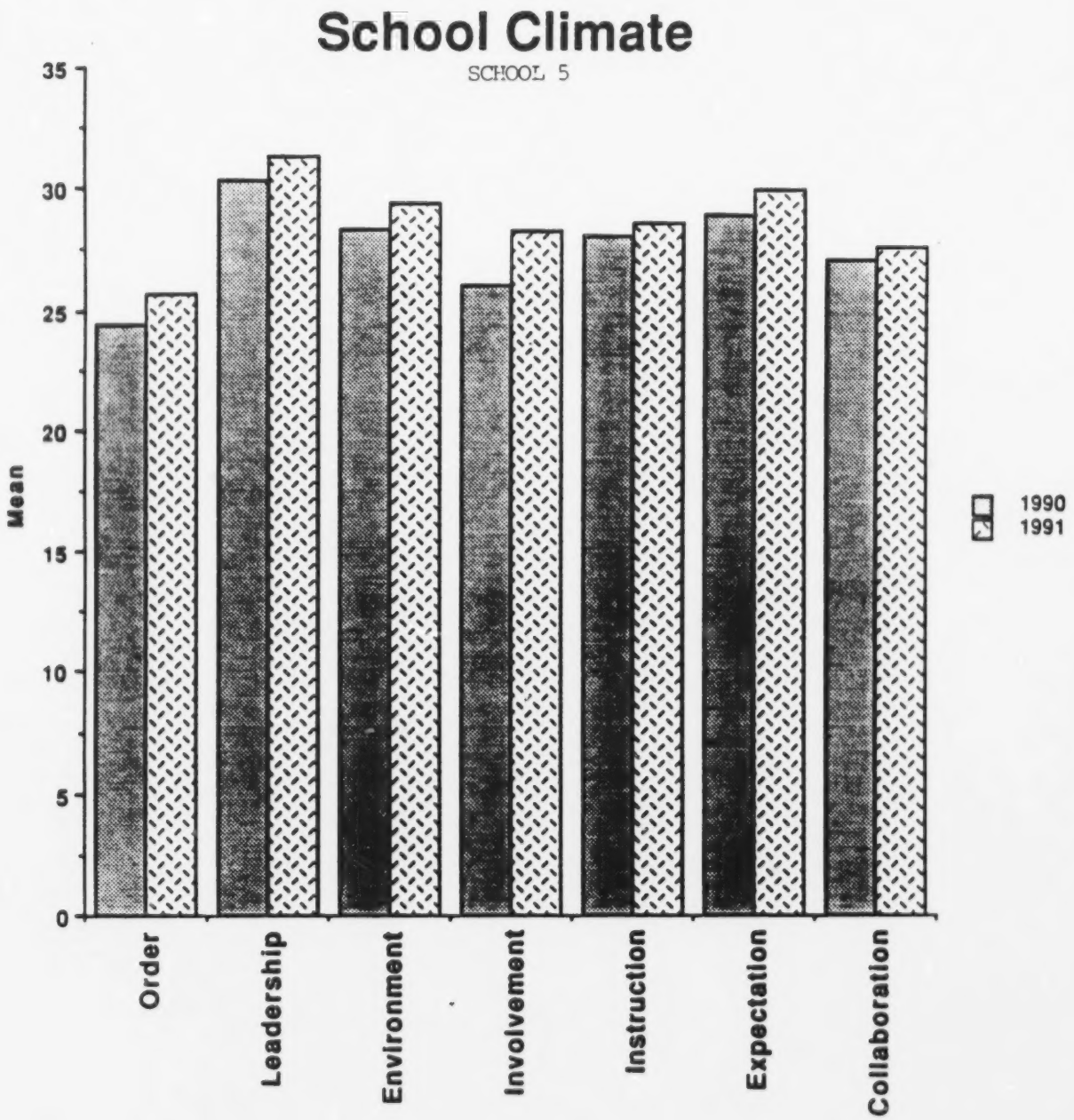
Diagram meeting room and seating arrangement below:

ISSUE/QUESTION	WHO BROUGHT ISSUE	DECISION PROCESS		OUTCOME
1.	____parent ____principal ____other administrator ____teacher ____student ____community member ____committee ____other (specify) _____	Discussion ___rational ___emotional ___mixed Discussion Partic. ___parent ___principal ___teacher ___other admin. ___student ___commun. mem ___committee ___other	__vote __consensus __compromise __assigned to committee __principal decided __tabled __no decision __other __sought input from expert __asked superiors to decide	

ISSUE/QUESTION	WHO BROUGHT ISSUE	DECISION PROCESS		OUTCOME
2.	____parent ____principal ____other administrator ____teacher ____student ____community member ____committee ____other (specify) _____	Discussion ___rational ___emotional ___mixed Discussion Partic ___parent ___principal ___teacher ___other admin. ___student ___commun. mem ___committee ___other	__vote __consensus __compromise __assigned to committee __principal decided __tabled __no decision __other __sought input from expert __asked superiors to decide	

ISSUE/QUESTION	WHO BROUGHT ISSUE	DECISION PROCESS		OUTCOME
3.	____parent ____principal ____other administrator ____teacher ____student ____community member ____committee ____other (specify) _____	Discussion ___rational ___emotional ___mixed Discussion Partic. ___parent ___principal ___teacher ___other admin. ___student ___commun. mem ___committee ___other	__vote __consensus __compromise __assigned to committee __principal decided __tabled __no decision __other __sought input from expert __asked superiors to decide	

APPENDIX B


School Climate
SCHOOL 5
Mean
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Order
Leadership
Environment
Involvement
Instruction
Expectation
Collaboration
1990
1991

School Climate Data Summary

school 5

	date 1990 N=		date 1991 N=		
Order					
13. Rules for student behavior are consistently enforced. (+)	86	4.49	80	4.33	-6
23. Student discipline is administered fairly and appropriately. (+)	82	4.27	90	4.42	8
25. Student misbehavior interferes with teaching. (-)	41	3.10	45	3.13	4
30. Student tardiness and absence is a problem. (-)	54	3.71	63	3.63	9
39. The school is a safe and secure place in which to work. (+)	74	4.11	85	4.33	11
44. Joint responsibility for student discipline exists. (+)	41	3.32	65	3.53	24
46. Student behavior is generally positive in this school. (+)	50	3.35	69	3.93	19
mean		24.46		25.17	
Leadership					
8. The administration communicates that all students can learn. (+)	96	4.73	95	4.65	-1
20. The administration encourages teachers to be creative. (+)	96	4.64	90	4.26	-6
34. The principal provides feedback on staff performance. (+)	82	4.70	85	4.69	3
36. The administration does not protect instructional time. (-)	23	2.33	10	2.05	-13
42. The principal provides strong instructional leadership. (+)	86	4.65	85	4.70	-1
45. School goals are reviewed and updated. (+)	73	4.16	90	4.50	17
47. The principal is highly visible throughout the school. (+)	82	4.55	95	4.75	13
mean		30.36		31.62	

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School Climate Data Summary

Environment	date 1990 N=		date 1991 N=		
		mean		mean	difference
7. Faculty and staff feel they are important. (+)	91	4.50	90	4.54	-1
9. Varied learning environments are provided. (+)	82	4.18	97	4.22	15
10. The school building is neat, bright, clean, and comfortable. (+)	82	4.14	87	4.37	5
14. Employees and students show respect for each other. (+)	68	3.76	77	3.97	9
29. An atmosphere of trust exists. (+)	59	3.68	70	3.95	11
38. Teachers reflect pride in this school and its students. (+)	82	4.53	93	4.55	11
49. People in this school really care about each other. (+)	59	4.12	78	4.13	19
mean		28.32		29.48	

Involvement					
		mean		mean	difference
5. Community businesses are active in the school. (+)	41	3.18	60	3.52	19
11. Parents are involved in a home-school support network. (+)	32	3.00	55	3.62	23
12. Parents are treated courteously. (+)	96	4.50	95	4.38	-1
18. Parents are invited to serve on school advisory committees. (+)	96	4.64	97	4.70	1
19. Parent volunteers are used wherever possible. (+)	59	3.64	75	4.40	16
32. A school newsletter or bulletin communicates information. (+)	23	2.90	48	3.51	25
37. Parents are invited to visit classrooms. (+)	77	4.25	85	4.44	8
mean		26.00		28.21	

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School Climate Data Summary

	date 1990 N=___		date 1991 N=___		
Instruction					
4. Teachers use a variety of teaching strategies or models. (+)	82	4.55	92	4.61	10
15. Learning is sequenced so that students experience success. (+)	86	4.24	87	4.30	1
24. Students have opportunities to develop higher order skills. (+)	82	4.38	85	4.36	3
33. Curriculum guides insure coverage of subject content. (+)	68	4.32	88	4.55	20
35. Appropriate evaluation methods are used to access learning. (+)	82	4.45	83	4.54	1
41. Pull out programs interfere with basic skills instruction. (-)	23	2.45	28	2.53	5
48. Teachers use a wide range of teaching materials. (+)	82	4.35	90	4.53	8
mean		28.09		29.07	

Expectations					
2. Low achieving students are given opportunity to succeed. (+)	86	4.57	85	4.58	-1
3. School rules and expectations are clearly communicated. (+)	82	4.48	97	4.63	15
17. Students share responsibility for the school environment. (+)	65	3.55	73	4.05	8
21. Students are held responsible for their actions. (+)	91	4.27	87	4.45	-4
22. Many students are not expected to master basic skills. (-)	23	1.73	10	1.75	-13
27. Many students do not participate in school activities. (-)	14	2.00	20	2.05	6
43. Teachers hold high expectations for students. (+)	77	4.15	88	4.38	11
mean		28.96		30.03	

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School Climate Data Summary

	date 1990 N= ___		date 1991 N= ___		
Collaboration					
1. The faculty share a sense of commitment to the school's goals. (+)	96	4.69	90	4.50	-6
6. Students are encouraged to help others with problems. (+)	77	4.14	70	3.82	-7
16. Teacher communication is encouraged. (+)	91	4.32	87	4.27	-4
26. Students participate in solving the school problems. (+)	50	3.63	63	3.80	13
28. Cooperation exists among the faculty and staff. (+)	77	4.55	93	4.45	16
31. Teachers need to participate more in school decision-making. (-)	45	3.35	23	2.89	-22
40. Most problems can be solved without outside help. (+)	54	3.40	68	4.00	14
mean		27.09		27.59	

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